



Medical School Hotline

JABSOM HOTLINE

Sunny Buddies, a Non-profit Organization Founded by JABSOM Students

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Sunny Buddies is a non-profit organization founded by JABSOM medical students whose mission is to provide support and services to individuals with mental retardation, by matching them with community volunteers. The program aims to nurture leadership, social skills, self-confidence, and autonomy to fully participate in a diverse community by assisting individuals with mental retardation to build relationships within the community. The program also aspires to increase public awareness by demonstrating that individuals with mental retardation are valuable and capable members of our community.

Sunny Buddies recruits, screens, trains, and evaluates volunteers who desire to provide services to people with mental retardation. Volunteers commit to the program for nine months and have a one-on-one outing at least twice a month. In addition, Sunny Buddies organizes group events to encourage further interactions, inviting the volunteers, clients, and their families.

An individual is considered to have mental retardation based on the following criteria: intellectual functioning level (IQ) is below 70-75; significant limitations exist in two or more adaptive skill areas; and the condition is present from childhood, defined as age 18 or less.¹

The effects of mental retardation vary among individuals, just as the range of abilities differ among individuals without the diagnosis of mental retardation. Approximately 87 percent will be mildly affected and slightly slower than average in learning new information and skills. As children, their mental retardation may not be readily apparent and may not be identified until they enter school. These individuals may be able to lead independent lives in the community as adults. The remaining 13 percent of individuals with mental retardation, those with IQs under 50, have serious limitations in functioning. However, with early intervention and appropriate support as adults, all can lead satisfying lives in the community. An estimated 6.2 to 7.5 million people have mental retardation, and one out of ten American families is directly affected by this diagnosis. In Hawaii, there are about 12,000 Hawaii adults with some form of mental retardation.²

In 1998, Melissa Lee (currently a second year family practice resident) and several other students conducted a demographic analysis of Hawaii's developmentally disabled population, which demonstrated that there was a clear need for more programs and services directed at this population. A project proposal, modeled after the national organization Best Buddies, was submitted to the Department of Health Developmental Disabilities Division and the University of Hawaii John A. Burns School of Medicine. Commitment and

support from the Department and University were established to develop a program in Hawaii.

Sunny Buddies evolved into a community based organization run by medical students. The officers received training from staff at the Department of Health in skills and knowledge necessary to work with individuals with mental retardation. Based on these experiences and additional research, a training manual was developed. In addition, contacts at the Department of Health became valuable team members who supported the program and continue to assist with screening and recruitment of volunteers, recruitment of clients, and matching between clients and volunteers. This collaborative partnership between Sunny Buddies and the Department of Health has been essential for the success of the organization.

Currently, the organization consists of three officers, all JABSOM medical students. Officers run the organization on a day-to-day basis, recruit volunteers, conduct training, monitor volunteers, and communicate with Department of Health staff. Two board members from the JABSOM faculty also assist with fiscal and policy issues. Expansion of the program has been gradual. On average, Sunny Buddies trained 10 new volunteers per year since 1998 and currently have close to 20 active volunteers. There continues to be over 60 clients on the waiting list at the Department of Health, who wish to be matched with a volunteer.

In 2000, Sunny Buddies became a designated Community Medicine site for first year medical students. The Community Medicine program at JABSOM was established to encourage students to see a "bigger picture" of medicine by placing them in community-based health and social service agencies, to adopt a biopsychosocial model of assessing health, and to develop their understanding of the roles of environment and public policy in primary care.³ In the past three years, 13 first-year medical students have participated in the Sunny Buddies program. Medical students are screened, trained and matched like other volunteers from the community. The program has been successful in providing a unique experience for medical students and to encourage some to continue to participate at the administrative level. Some students have continued beyond their required units despite their busy schedule, because they were able to build a strong relationship with their buddy and found the interactions rewarding. The medical students reflect on their community medicine experiences and submit a "critical incident report." The following are some excerpts from past participants describing their experiences:

"Spending time with my buddy throughout these past units has given me a chance to appreciate another person's perspective on life. It has given me a chance to practice patience and understanding in dealing with people who have special needs. Overcoming communication barriers and accepting the limitations of friendship were also valuable experiences for me."

"My buddy is a 30-year-old male with Down's Syndrome. Most of our outings are centered on bowling and having lunch. His brother tells me that he looks forward to seeing me every two weeks and runs around the house making bowling motions every time he hears my name. This buddy experience was particularly interesting for me mainly because I had concerns about how I would interact with him since my buddy does not speak. If he needs or wants something he will sign for it, something that I had to pick up along the way. However, there are many things that I don't necessarily understand

in sign, but we always seem to work things out. This just goes to show that speaking is not always necessary and is not always the most effective form of communication."

"Overall, I have gained a lot by being involved with this program. I have learned about how life is for a person with Down's Syndrome and what it's like to be a parent of a child with Down's Syndrome. My buddy's mother is a great woman and I can sense her deep love for her son. I also learned a lot about myself, realizing that people with disabilities are no different from the rest of us and that they are easy to engage and interact with."

All of the current medical student officers have been past or ongoing volunteers of Sunny Buddies. It is anticipated that this program will continue to be supported by JABSOM students and the medical school.

The most challenging aspect of any non-profit organization is obtaining adequate funding. Although the organization is completely run by volunteers, expenses mostly related to office supplies and insuring the volunteers and officers necessitate fundraising and grant-writing. The Office of Medical Education has been generous in supporting the organization, in addition to a grant from the McGuire Fund. Most recently a small grant has been awarded from the Laura and Dallas Smith Foundation through the Hawaii Community Foundation.

It has been four years since a first year medical student's idea to fulfill a community's need became a reality. The legacy continues in the form of a thriving non-profit organization that continues to be run by medical students. JABSOM's emphasis on community medicine and its support of students' creative efforts have been a major impetus for the organization's success. With support from JABSOM and the medical community, Sunny Buddies will continue to fulfill its mission in Hawaii.

For additional information about the organization, please call 808-735-5031 or email kayashim@hawaii.edu.

References

1. Introduction to Mental Retardation: www.thearc.org/fags/mrga.html
2. Kubota, Gary T. Voting right for retarded earns acclaim. A recent law prevents discrimination against the mentally disabled. Honolulu Star Bulletin. April 24, 2002. Starbulletin.com.
3. Community Medicine Handbook. Office of Medical Education, John A. Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawaii at Manoa. Revised 2001.

FIVE WAYS TO DIE ON THE GOLF COURSE:

1. Hit by a golf ball.
2. Run over by a golf cart.
3. Whacked by a golf club.
4. Struck by lightning.
5. Forgot your hat.

Surprisingly, one million new cases of skin cancer are detected every year. One person an hour in the U.S. dies from melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer. If you spend a lot of time in the sun, you should protect yourself. One out of five Americans develops skin cancer during their lifetime. Don't be one of them. Stay out of the midday sun. Cover up. Wear a hat. Seek shade. And use sunscreen. For more information on how to protect yourself from skin cancer, call 1-888-462-DERM or visit www.aad.org.



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